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My Experiences Learning Irish (In the Seventies) (Continued)

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MY EXPERIENCES LEARNING IRISH.

(IN THE SEVENTIES.)

(WILLIAM O'LAOGHAIRNE.)

(Continued.)

At length the "Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language" was formed, and soon after I saw in the "Freeman" that a little offshoot of the society, under the name of the "Craobh Ruad" was accustomed to meet on certain evenings at the Mechanic's Institute for the study of Irish. I called there on one of the evenings and enquired where was the Irish class. The attendant did not know. The French class was in the room overhead, the English class in the next room, but "the devil a know I know where the Irish class is except it's in the billiard room." It was not in the billiard room, so I came down stairs disconsolately, and was about to leave when the attendant shouted to me—"Did you try the cellar?" I went down, felt my way in the gloom, pushed open a door, and saw a long, low, damp apartment, with cobwebbed windows half covered with the dust which fell through the street gratings; a coarse bare table, two short forms, on which were seated two young men and one elderly gentleman; an office stool, on which the Irish Professor sat with an antique volume of the "Four Masters" open before him; and a rusty, naked gas jet glimmering over all. This was the "Craobh Ruad"—Irish class, and the position it occupied is a fair gauge of the position the native language held in the minds of the citizens of that day. English, French, German, and shorthand classes met in decent rooms above ground; but the poor little Irish class had to stay in the cellar surrounded by an atmosphere of abomination. In spite of the uninviting look of the place and the disagreeable surroundings I spent many an enjoyable evening there. The members were few; two or three young men from some of the neighbouring warehouses joined later, but I think the total number in the class never exceeded ten. There was no regular system of study or uniform set of books. One read the "first book;" another Bourke's "Easy Lessons," a third McHale's version of the Irish Melodies, while the professor occasionally terrified us with a sentence from the Four Masters. Nor were all the members equally imbued with the love of learning, for sometimes in the middle of a lesson a couple of musical geniuses would insist on entertaining the meeting with a song; and often a political debate occupied the greater part of the night and prevented the more studious from making any progress. But it was all extremely amusing, and though I did not learn much Irish (not a member of the class could speak a word of the language) I had the pleasure of becoming acquainted with at least two or three sincere lovers of the Irish language. One was the elderly gentleman I saw seated on the form—when I first visited the cellar—a Dublin merchant who, in the midst of an arduous business, had found time to study not only Irish but French and Latin. He was also a good musician and translated several songs and poems to English, and some of Lover's songs to Irish in a musicianly style. He came among us youngsters as an humble student while in fact he knew more Irish than the whole class together, professor included.

The "Craobh Ruad" withered very quickly. Its members gradually dwindled; some had to seek work in other towns; some got tired of Irish, and in a few months the gas was put out and the cellar knew them no more. With the exception of the old gentleman

*Red Branch.

(now, alas! many years dead) I think I never saw one of our Irish class again, but I am glad to know that two at least still survive and have done good work in editing and publishing Irish books.

After a period of apathy a revival set in. The Irish Language Society published some good text books and Ossianic tales: the "Gaelic League" was founded the "Gaelic Journal," and O'Growney's Lessons issued, and, best of all, Dr. Hyde published his splendid collection of Irish Folk tales. Though my ideal modern Irish story has not yet appeared, I think some of Dr. Hyde's tales come very near it. The stories, etc., of O'Flanagan are interesting, but the addition of notes and a more extensive vocabulary would be an improvement as some of the phrases are too difficult for a beginner.

So many excellent works have appeared of late from various eminent Gaelic scholars that there is now scarcely any danger of the student being at a loss for something to read. For my own part I like Dr. Hyde's stories best of all. His "Atp tuacra" is very curious, and "Tadg O'Kane" is the wildest and most awful ghost story I ever read. In fact all his stories are interesting; and what is as important to the student they are also simple and easy to read. And if a hard or obscure phrase occur (which is rarely) it is sure to be explained in a note. This last is a somewhat unusual feature, for the majority of editors busy themselves explaining what is perfectly obvious and leave the difficulties to be explained by the student. As I never expected to have an opportunity of speaking the language, the most I hoped for was some facility in translating modern Irish. This, with the occasional help of a dictionary, I could now do. I found a difficulty, sometimes, from the use of provincialisms, or words not in the dictionary, and the want of uniformity in spelling. The last is most annoying to the ordinary hurried reader. If he meet a hard word in the text he may have to search for it under four or five different spellings in the dictionary, and the chances are he won't find it after all. There may be a little excuse for unsettled spelling in unusual words, but in words of every day use it is inexcusable. Here is one example. I got the idea firmly fixed in my head by Canon Bourke and the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language that céao meant a hundred, and ceuo meant first. Some time after I found in Joyce's grammar that céao was first and céao a hundred. When I came to consult O'Reilly's dictionary I found that céao meant a hundred, and ceao (unaccented) meant first; the latter form is, I think, a mistake, as it is exactly like the word ceao, permission. The last dictionary I looked at was Coney's, and here in direct opposition to Bourke and the S. P. I. L., and differing from all the others. I learned that céao meant first, and ceuo a hundred. To one who remembers his declensions and the various changes produced on initial consonants by some of the numeral adjectives, it is of course easy to know whether a hundred or first or permission is meant, but it helps to puzzle the beginner. Similarly I was taught that aḡur, and, was sometimes written 'sur, a'r, 'r, or 7; and that 1r was the present tense assertive form of the verb to be. As if these four contractions of aḡur were not enough, I find many recent writers using 1r for no apparent reason except to confuse the student. I hope the new dictionary will correct such irregularities and settle the spelling of all doubtful words.

THE END.

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